



Pick Your Path to Health

Are Women More Vulnerable to Alcohol's Effects?

"After one and a half, maybe two drinks, I am very relaxed and I know I've had enough," says Irma Small of Temple Hills, Maryland, as she reflects on how much alcohol she usually drinks when she goes out, and the kind of effect alcohol has on her. "It makes me relax and open. I don't get messed up. Some people don't know when they've had enough. They get too relaxed. They stop paying attention to their environment, letting their guard down. That's not good because it might make you do things you wouldn't normally do or you might be easier to take advantage of."

Ms. Small says she sets drinking limits for herself. Setting limits is good because women are more vulnerable to alcohol's effects.

Separate and Unequal

According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAA), African American women drink less than their white female counterparts and have a low incidence of alcohol abuse or alcoholism. All women, as a whole, drink less alcohol than men do. However, women who do drink experience more of the negative effects of alcohol abuse and overindulgence. When comparing women to men, NIAA says women develop alcohol-induced liver disease over a shorter period of time, and after consuming less alcohol than men, are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis, and are more likely to be victims of sexual aggression or partner violence. The bottom line is that women are not treated as equals when it comes to how alcohol affects the body.

Be Aware and Beware

Alcohol is a complicated substance. When taken in small amounts and in moderation (1-2 drinks a day), it may be enjoyed in a controlled manner; in larger quantities it can have detrimental health effects. Some people may develop a harmful pattern of alcohol use called alcohol abuse, and some people develop a physiological dependence on alcohol and develop a disease called alcoholism.

Be aware of how you use alcohol and its effect on your health and your daily life. Awareness can be the first step to making positive changes and avoiding negative consequences.

"Alcohol, for some people, is a slow, selective seducer. Although my experience was that women tended to have a faster onset of alcohol abuse and a higher tolerance for alcohol than men, many of them never saw it coming. They would take a drink to relax when they came home at night, or only drink on the weekends, and would feel good and not have a problem with it. This would go on for many years without any adverse effects. But because there was one or a mixture of factors working against them—either a genetic predisposition, family history of alcoholism, trauma or abuse as a child, divorce or other stresses, ...boom! They started missing time at work, they made poor choices when drinking, they started drinking in the morning to 'get started,' and came to find they were traveling on a road they had no idea they were on," reports Hope Depp, LICSW, of Washington, D.C., therapist and former director of a local drug and alcohol outpatient treatment center.

Making Yourself Less Vulnerable

Here are steps you can take to keep you healthy and free from overindulgence in alcohol.

- **Know your family history:** If there is a history of alcohol abuse in the family that increases your risk.
- **Know your limits:** Limit your alcohol consumption to one or two drinks in a given day.
- **Don't mix drinks:** Stick with the same drink, don't mix and match.
- **Try alcohol-free or "virgin" drinks:** They taste about the same. Herbal teas and hot ciders are also nice. Throw an alcohol-free party.
- **Keep a journal or diary:** For one week, write down how often you drink, how much, what you drink, what you're doing or where you are and what you are feeling. See if there is a pattern.
- **Reflect on your habits:** Do you feel you drink too much? Have your friends or family ever commented on your drinking? Does drinking ever have a negative effect on your social life, family life or work life? Does your personality change or do you do things uncharacteristically when you drink? If yes, talk to your physician about how to get help and contact the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-729-6686 to learn more.
- **Try a happier hour:** Instead of the typical happy hour office camaraderie trips to a bar, suggest a Happy Hour at the local coffee shop or ice cream parlor.
- **Evaluate your associations:** Birds of a feather flock together. If your friends or associates drink a lot, perhaps you need to make

new friends. Join a book club, a dance class. Make sure your friendships aren't focused just on "getting high" or drinking-related activities.

- **Make sure you have healthy outlets:** Take a yoga or art class at a local college or parks and recreation center. To relieve stress, take a walk, pray, get a massage. To unwind at the end of the day get into a hot, bubble bath while listening to one of your favorite CDs.
- **Share your feelings:** Don't drink to them. If you are depressed or lonely or going through stressful times, such as a divorce or death of a loved one, seek support from your family or community. Contact your minister, local church or hospital for names and types of support groups. If you have Internet access, there are support groups online as well. People need to connect and you could help someone else as much as they could help you.

As Ms. McCoy puts it, "You don't have to drink to have a good time." But if you do drink, be aware and know your limits. Don't let alcohol trip you up on your path to a more healthy you.

For additional information on alcohol and its effects of alcohol on the body, and information on treatment assistance:

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, www.niaaa.nih.gov, 301-443-3860
- National Women's Health Information Center, Office of Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, www.4woman.gov, 1-800-994-woman
- The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service, 1-800-662-HELP.
- National Black Women's Health Project, www.blackwomenshealth.org, 202-543-9311

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."